A Single Decision (Take Two)

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Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]

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Chapter 16

Asajj Ventress checked the message again, for the hundredth time since she'd received it a week ago.

O K R2 ALIVE.

While 'R2' was cryptic, she had doubt who 'O K' was, and no doubt of where he was either. It came straight from *Invisible Hand,* sent to her long-abandoned Separatist mailing address. Asajj hadn't even meant to check it but for a strange dream. Perhaps the Force had spoken to her that night, because in the morning she saw what Kenobi had sent.

I can't believe I'm getting dragged back into this, to help him, she thought. *I can't believe who I'm going to ask for help.*

It'd taken six days to get to Mandalore, security was tight now that it was under Republic occupation and all the main hyperlanes into the sector were mined. Fortunately her ship, *Banshee*, had a cloaking device, which did more than just drain power from the reactor for once. This was where Ahsoka Tano had been seen last, dealing with... Well, Asajj wasn't quite sure what had happened here. Some kind of mercenary criminal warband had taken over the pacifistic planet and invited the wrath of the Separatists upon it. The Republic moved in first. And somehow, Tano had ended up here with them, despite no longer being a Jedi. There had been rumors of rogue Jedi and a certain black-skinned Zabrak with red tattoos...

Asajj breathed in deeply, and exhaled. She pushed the ringer button on the door of the requisitioned apartment Tano was staying in. Maybe it would have been better to talk to her via hologram first-

The door opened, and there she was. The orange brat. Taller in the year that had passed since her expulsion from the Jedi Order, and looking more like a woman grown than a gangly teenager. She stared at Asajj in confounded surprise. "What are *you* doing here?" she finally hissed, eyes narrowing.

"Believe me, kid, you're not exactly high on the list of people I wanted to see again," said Asajj. "But you and I have more in common than being merely abandoned by the Jedi, now."

"If you're here to gloat-"

"No, I'm not." Asajj looked away. "For what it's worth, I never liked Skywalker, and I'm not sad to see him go, but I know what it's like to lose your master, and for that... I am sorry." Actually, she'd lost two masters now. She hated that Dooku's death had stirred her heart, even after all this time since he betrayed her.

"Well..." Tano seemed to deflate where she stood, the fight leaving her body. She just looked tired now. "Why are you here, then?"

All Asajj had for an answer was the datapad with Kenobi's message on it. Tano's eyes widened, and Asajj could feel the burst of hope from her through the Force. "This came to me from Grievous's flagship, last week during the failed coup on Raxus."

"I really hoped they'd get him," Tano said quietly. "So, Master Obi-wan is alive, and came to you for help?"

"He must only have had access to internal Separatist communications, because that's how I got it. I can't believe they never deleted my address in their system." Asajj shook her head. "But that's beside the point! Kenobi's in trouble again, I'm going to get him out of it. Are you with me or not?"

"Like you even need to ask," said Tano. "You can't be doing this out of the goodness of your heart, though."

"Of course not, you think I've gone soft?" Asajj laughed. "This is a chance to screw over Grievous, I'm taking it." But, Tano was right, she had a fondness for Kenobi that she just couldn't let go. Giving up on the dark side of the Force had changed her more than she cared to admit.

"Come inside, let's get a plan going."

Asajj was interested to see that Tano had her old lightsabers back. Sadly, her red ones given to her by Dooku had remained in the possession of the Jedi. She cursed Barris Offee every day for that. Although, she did like her new yellow-bladed lightsaber. It might have been black market contraband, but it went with the new her.

"When did you start growing out your hair?" Tano asked.

"A while back. I've been trying to look less recognizable."

"It would have worked if we hadn't fought so many times before," said Tano.

United by a desire to rescue a mutual friend and cause trouble for a mutual enemy, Asajj was pleasantly surprised to find their discussion was amiable. Awkward at times, but they managed to let the past stay in the past.

"How are we getting onto Grievous's ship?" asked Tano. "I can get us to Raxus, but infiltrating the Separatist fleet is another matter."

"Oh, I have a cloaked ship, we can just fly right in."

"Where did you even get something like that?"

"Do you want to know?"

Tano sighed. "No, not really. But it's not going to be as easy as it sounds, though, is it?"

"No..." Asajj tapped her fingers together. "Dooku's ship, *Providence,* was the lead ship of the class. But all the others were built to modified designs. There's no guarantee I'll be able to find my way around."

"Well, R2 is there, so we'll have that," said Tano.

"Who?"

"R2-D2. Anakin's astromech droid. He was on the ship with them when... Well, R2 is very good at not getting noticed. The message mentions him, so he must still be on Grievous's ship." Tano smiled a little. "He's a survivor, alright."

"I see." Asajj wasn't sure she wanted to trust an astromech droid that could very well have been mind-wiped by now. "Let's say this R2 knows his way around the ship. Let's say I can get us onboard without being noticed. What happens then?"

"Well, we find Master Obi-wan and rescue him," said Tano, like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"I mean *after* that. I helped you back on Coruscant because you said you'd get me full pardon. You ended up leaving the Order and bailing on me instead."

At least Tano had the grace to look ashamed. "Yeah, sorry about that... I didn't go up to the Council planning to leave. They were just... so arrogant and full of themselves, I acted without really thinking it through."

"Well, that makes two of us," said Asajj. "I want my pardon this time, though. For real."

"I can't promise anything," Tano said. "But if the both of us come back with Master Obi-wan, I'm sure they'll be willing to cut you a deal."

"I'll take it, if that's all you've got."

"Captain Rex won't approve of this..."

"Stop mentioning people I don't know," Asajj muttered.

"Oh, but Rex knows *you*," said Tano with a dark smirk. "He remembers you *very* well."

Asajj wasn't sure what the former Jedi meant by this.

For the first time in years, Esera was without responsibilities or obligations. She had no idea what to do with herself. Lirka and Sirka did, though. In a week, Esera learned more about a normal woman's life than she had in an entire lifetime of being a Jedi. Even if that lifetime was only seventeen years. It was a fascinating insight into what could have been, if no Jedi had ever come to Stalimur.

The story of what had happened during the coup didn't go beyond the Sephi household. Esera wanted to avoid attention and fame. However, the twin sisters were adamantly insistent that Esera be treated like a hero. Which she was, to them.

"Jedi aren't supposed to have many material possessions," said Esera to Lirka one day.

"You aren't a Jedi anymore," Lirka told her. "And since you'll be working for General Grievous, you're going to need formal wear, for formal occasions."

"Grievous and formal occasions *do not* go together," Esera said. But Lirka insisted on fitting her for a veritable wardrobe nonetheless. Her ratty old secondhand spacer clothes were offensive to the high-class Sephi sisters. Esera finally got her to stop by telling her that she was only her current size because of half a year of siege warfare had turned her into a walking skeleton. That wasn't something Esera had been conscious of before, but without her Jedi robes to hide in and no longer in a life-or-death situation every few hours, *and* frequently in the company of two tall and beautiful near-Human women, she was now very aware of what she looked like. A moderate breeze might snap her in half, she feared. An angry glare from Grievous definitely would.

"At least let us get you some proper everyday clothes, then," said Sirka. "We'll worry about everything else once you're healthy again."

"And a haircut too," Lirka said. Esera agreed only because shorter hair was easier to keep clean. When the Sephi had finished with her, she looked like an unremarkable middle-class young Raxian woman. One who was recovering from a long chronic illness. And who hadn't been out in sunlight for months. *That won't change,* Esera thought, *I'm going back to life on a starship soon.*

"My head feels really light now," Esera said. "I can see my ears again, that's weird."

"You don't look like a bog witch anymore," Lirka said.

"A what?"

"It's a legend from our homeworld," said Sirka. "There are witches in the bogs. They've got faces like skulls, fingers like needles, and long stringy hair. You're down the stringy hair, now."

"Oh, thanks," Esera said, frowning at the two Sephi.

While she was being dragged around Raxulon city by the sisters, Esera did a lot of thinking about her future. An ex-Jedi who hadn't fallen to the dark side, fighting for the Separatists, was something unprecedented as far as she was aware. Dooku was dead, Ventress was vanished, there were no Sith left as far as she knew. Except... *Grievous mentioned Sidious,* Esera thought. *Who is Sidious? Dooku's master?* She'd heard rumors of a Sith greater than Dooku, among other Jedi. But never had she heard any name attached to that mysterious figure. And it seemed Grievous was interested in whoever Sidious was too.

There was also Obi-wan Kenobi to consider, alive and probably not well in captivity on Grievous's ship. Esera felt just a little guilty for sitting down on Raxus discovering what cafes and hair salons were while one of the greatest Jedi knights alive languished in the dungeons of Grievous. But at the same time, she wasn't one of them anymore. They'd exiled her. She'd pledged her allegiance to the Confederacy of Independent Systems and turned her back on the Republic so wholly that she could never go back now.

And Esera realized, while sitting in one of those cafes the Sephi liked to bring her to, one ear listening to the news and one hear listening to the sisters chat, watching the crowds make their way through the snowy streets, that she *didn't* want to go back. Esera felt a sense of belonging she'd hardly known before, except with her master. She didn't agree with all the things the Separatists said, but they themselves didn't agree with each other either. The diversity of political opinion in the Confederacy was unlike anything Esera had ever encountered before.

In her eyes, Sith or not, Dooku had been completely right. The Jabiimi revolutionaries had thrown themselves in with the reactionary galactic mega-corporations, the free-enterprising minarchists of Fallowan and the technocrats of Yag'Dhul had allied with the federalists of Sluis Van and class-conscious Agamarians. If this disparate band of malcontents and radicals who normally would have been at each other's throats had all united in agreement that *something* had to be done and that the Republic had to go... *The Republic cannot be fixed,* thought Esera, remembering what Dooku had said in his speeches before the war. This war was the pivotal moment, just as he had said. They would either create a new order, borne unto the galaxy on the winds of liberty, or civilization would languish under a darkness that would not end. Esera knew what side she was on, now. For once in her life, she was at ease.

There's good here, among these people, she thought. *I need to defend it. I need to encourage it. And I've got the ear of the one at the top.*

Whether or not Grievous was interested in changing his ways was something else, though. What could one ex-Jedi girl who Grievous hated the least among her kind do? There was only one way to find out. Esera didn't regret what she'd last said to him. *If I can get through to him like no one else can, I can change everything,* she dared to think. There was a noble cause beneath everything else in the Separatist movement. And if she could get them to fight with half the honor and restraint the Jedi had once shown, she'd consider it a job well done.

But that was the problem. Esera thought back to the mysterious Helnurath's raid on Kuat. Eighteen thousand innocent people had died because of his actions, before he and his fleet vanished off the well-traveled hyperspace lanes. Eighteen thousand wasn't even a drop in an ocean compared to the population of the galaxy. But that didn't make their lives worth any less, to Esera. All life had value. Even an angry murderous cyborg's, she had discovered. If there was even an ounce of good in that machine heart of his, she'd find it. Someone had to show him the right way.

If not me, who? If not now, when?

Nute Gunray, Wat Tambor, Poggle the Lesser, and Tikkes the Quarren were the only four members of the now-disbanded Separatist Council that were yet free. Grievous had them in a small conference room on the Congress building on Raxus.

"You four are lucky to be alive," Grievous told them.

"The Techno Union had no part in this dastardly scheme, General," Wat Tambor said, leaning back in his seat with his arms crossed.

"*We have always been for the Confederacy,*" said Poggle.

"Without me, you would be dead right now," Gunray said. Inside, he was nearly panicking, but he kept his composure as best he could. Tikkes sat silently, eyes fixed on the floor, looking like he was about to be sick. Unlike the other three, he'd *actually* been in on the plot against Grievous.

The cyborg stalked back and forth through across the front of the room, arms clasped behind his back. He must have been thinking, because he said nothing for a several long, tense, and awkward minutes.

"Your compatriots *will* die for what they've done," Grievous finally spoke. "And you will find yourselves without any of the power you once held. Your delegates in the Congress will take your places representing your interests."

"This is fair," said Tambor. "We are ready to play our part in this new era."

"You will go to Metalorn and oversee the production there," Grievous said to him. "I am holding you personally responsible for any further failures of quality control in our war materiel."

"I will not fail you, General!" the Skakoan said, standing up and saluting sharply.

"And you, Archduke," said Grievous, turning to Poggle. "Tell me of this *contraption* your workers were building for the Republic, before you escape their occupation force on Geonosis."

"*I should not discuss the Ultimate Weapon openly,*" said Poggle, eyeing the other two.

"Very well." Now the cyborg turned to Tikkes. "This scum is only here because the Quarren Isolation League don't want him getting executed. It'd make them look bad, and since they build many of my ships, I have granted them their wish."

"You are most magnanimous, General," Tambor said. "Our friend Tikkes has been reduced to buying his meals from Trade Federation vending machines each day. It is more of a punishment to keep him alive than to kill him!"

"Yes, it is," said Grievous. "But I will have a *very* close eye on him." Grievous looked to Gunray. "And you, Viceroy, I do not believe you were not planning to betray the traitors from the start. You have always been an opportunist."

Gunray tried very hard not to tremble. "But I am here, and they are not," he said.

"Yes..." Grievous stalked about some more, like a caged predator. "You are going to resign as Viceroy of the Trade Federation," he said.

"I sent my letter of resignation to the board of directors this morning. Rune Haako will replace me," Gunray said. "I am retiring from this war."

The cyborg stopped, and laughed. "Do you think I trust you enough to stay out of trouble on your own? No, you will serve as my minister of finance."

"What?" squeaked Gunray. *Minister?*

"The serpent in Congress has been insisting I form a cabinet to help me with governing, so that is what I am doing," Grievous said, rubbing his claws together. "I need a financial expert, and I need to keep you close, because I don't trust you."

"Two birds with one stone..." muttered Gunray faintly. The cyborg gave him a confused stare.

"What did he mean by this?" Grievous asked to Tambor.

"It's a Corellian phrase, General. Taking care of two problems at once," Tambor said.

As to what a minister of finance did, Nute Gunray could only imagine. After a few hours of investigation on Raxus, he discovered that there was *no* ministry of finance. It didn't exist. And he was the one who was expected to put it together.

"Well, Minister Gunray," said Corlissi Ludar the Sluissi, the de facto leader of the Confederate Congress, while meeting Gunray in his office, "many of us are of the opinion we need a slightly less-decentralized government. Creating a department to oversee the management of our financial resources seems like the perfect job for you. Grievous came up with the idea himself."

"And here I was thinking I'd be enjoying a peaceful retirement," said Gunray, slumping down in his seat.

The Sluissi smiled, devoid of any warmth. "I'm afraid universal war has universal consequences, Minister."

"Jedi girl," Grievous barked into his communicator.

"What?" came the girl's voice.

"It's time. Pack your things, we are going to my ship."

"Alright, alright," she said. "When?"

"Right now." Grievous slammed his hand against the door of the Sephi's woodland home. Behind him, his shuttle's engines idled, not even powering down.

"Oh, that's you out there," said the girl.

Minutes later, she appeared, looking far cleaner and even a little healthier than she had before. Grievous wasn't a great judge of Humans, but a week of rest had done her well. She'd even cut her hair down, short enough that grabbing it in a fight would be inconvenient for her opponent as it would be for her. The girl had also ditched her ill-fitting shabby clothes that she'd worn on their last meeting; now she was in an outfit that was clean, well-fitted, and possibly even stylish. Grievous knew little about fashion and style, but he did know about textiles from years of making cloaks for his magnaguards, and the girl's new clothes were not cheaply made. The Sephi were treating her well.

She bade farewell to her Sephi friends, and brought her things to his shuttle. The girl only had a single traveling case, and an astromech droid. *Always with the droids, these Jedi,* Grievous thought.

"This is R8-M5," the girl said. The droid beeped uneasily at him. It was grey with green panels, reminding him of the trashcan that always followed Kenobi and Skywalker around. But that one had blue panels. Had Grievous seen one like that on *Invisible Hand?* He couldn't quite recall.

"I don't care," Grievous told her.

"I just thought you should know..."

The Jedi girl – well, she wasn't much of a Jedi anymore – sat still and quiet from then on, staring at the floor. He could hear her heart beating, which was impressive, even with his greatly enhanced senses. No doubt she was questioning the choice she'd made a week ago. For the whole flight up to *Invisible Hand,* she was silent. And when the shuttle touched down on the hangar deck, she was hesitant to get out.

"What are you waiting for?" asked Grievous. "Do you think I'm going to have my droids shoot you the moment you step out?"

"I mean, I wouldn't put it past you," she said, taking a cautious step onto the ramp.

"If you really believed that, would you have come here?" Grievous asked.

"Yeah, yeah..." the girl sighed. She followed Grievous through the halls of the ship, the two of them were flanked by a pair of magnaguards. If the droids thought anything of it, they didn't remark on the subject. As far as they knew, this girl was just a new ally. Only allies traveled with Grievous to his personal domain.

Wait, what?

As if he were on autopilot, Grievous had walked to the turbolift that went up to his tower-top home. The Jedi girl had tagged along, because obviously she had never been on this ship before and had no idea where she was going, and for lack of other direction, had simply stuck with him. Now they were in the lift, going up. There was no turning back now. *I suppose my tower is as good a place as any for some questioning,* Grievous thought. Once the doors opened, he signaled for her to follow him down onto the observation deck.

"Quite the view," the girl muttered. The windows were several times taller than she, and offered a hundred and eighty degree range of vision around the ship. The green, brown and blue surface of Raxus stretched out before their eyes until the planet's curvature pulled away from them; had it not been for a slight reflection, they could have thought they were but a few meters from falling down onto the planet, thousands of kilometers away. "What are we doing up here?" she asked, keeping her eyes on the interior of the ship.

"This is where I live," Grievous told her. He took a seat behind his desk, the same swiveling chair he'd had Palpatine restrained in once.

"I don't get to sit?" asked the girl, looking around the mostly empty chamber.

"I am not one for visitors. Stand."

"As you wish," the girl sighed. Now, it was time to discover what was going on in her head.

"Why are you here?" asked Grievous.

"What?" The girl blinked, and gave him a confused look. "You... invited me, just now..?"

"Not here, *here*." Grievous pointed at her. "Why are you standing in front of me? Why aren't you striking me down right now, and ending this war? Why is a Jedi aboard the flagship of the Confederacy as a guest instead of an intruder? Why are you *here?*"

"Oh... right." There was a sheepish look on her face. "I kind of already told you, when we first met... Holt and Aspar were going to bomb all those cities on Shumavar, regardless of the... collateral damage. I couldn't let it happen. We're not *supposed* to be murderers, you know?" The girl smiled, but it wasn't a happy smile. "I mean, I guess you can say I reached a point where I either had to act on what I believed in, or live without belief. I acted, and look where it got me."

"You were a Separatist all along?" Grievous asked.

"No!" sighed the girl, putting a hand over her eyes. "I had no intention of turning into a Separatist. But I'm not surprised I did. I guess I've always been sympathetic to the movement... The Jedi didn't take me so young that I have no memory of where I came from."

"So, *why?*" asked Grievous again. "How does a Jedi, claiming to act on her personal convictions, go from servant of the Republic to adviser to her order's worst enemy, in a matter of weeks?"

"I'm almost as much in the dark as you are," said the girl. "I'd lost faith in the Republic a while ago, I admit. Probably all the way back on Jabiim. I always knew we treated the peripherals poorly. I grew up hearing news about the Separatist Crisis, and since my master always encouraged me to look for agendas, I didn't trust HNN."

"Is that Republic propaganda?" asked Grievous.

"These days, definitely," the girl agreed. "About as slanted as your Raxus Today. But... you see how the Core is exploiting the peripherals, you see how corrupt and broken the system is, and you see the total vindication of everything Dooku had been saying when we – the Republic – attacked Geonosis and started the war... And you try to reconcile that with the oath of allegiance you swore to the Order and the state... It wasn't going to work out." The girl sighed again, shoulders slumping. "I was born on Stalimur, you know, here in the Tion Cluster. Actually only a hour or two away from here with a good hyperdrive. I remember being hungry a lot, that's probably why my family gave me up to the Jedi. There's a lot of poverty out here, a lot of neglect. Of course they all jumped at a chance to have their voices heard for once in their lives. And here I was, crushing them with a bunch of slave-soldiers born to die."

A moment of quiet passed, and Grievous said nothing. He figured that if he just let her talk, he'd learn everything he wanted to know. And on she went: "At first, it was just killing droids- easy. They're not *real* people, they're don't actually *matter*, right? Our enemies were cowards hiding behind a bunch of mass-produced robots, like our Senate was hiding behind a bunch of mass-produced clones. But then, we started killing actual people. Alright, I could handle that. If someone starts shooting at me, I'll defend myself. I always gave them a chance to surrender. And then, finally, Palpatine's commanders started bypassing the Jedi Council. They didn't have our morality, they didn't have our reservations. I've never killed an innocent, and I wasn't about to start now. In fact, as a Jedi, it was my *duty* to protect the innocent! Right? So what do they do, when I follow our teachings, and do not sit idly by when evil shows itself? They exile me! They declare me a traitor! We have reached a point where the Jedi Order is so consumed by this war that they would rather blindly serve the political entity they favor than do the right thing! And if anyone so much as speaks out against it, they get discarded like trash!"

The girl had worked herself up, and was now so flustered that her clenched fists were shaking. "This dogmatism, this arrogance-! How could I owe loyalty such an institution, that clearly had no such loyalty to me? They turned their back on me, I turned my back on them! At least I can say I'm not a pawn of a parasitic band of interstellar robber-barons! I did what was right when no one else would, and who took me in? You, the Separatists! Who showed me mercy after my own people tried to kill me? You, Grievous!" She exhaled, and closed her eyes. "I don't know how- I don't know *why* this happened," she finally spoke, now quiet. "But here I am, with a clean conscience. That's more then I had before. And as to why I'm here, standing in front of you? I've got literally nothing left, General. No one to go to, nowhere to stay, nothing to do. I saw a chance to change things for the better, I took it."

For a while, Grievous reflected on what the girl had said. It would have been tempting to judge her as a slave to her own sentiment, but there was logic to the chain of decisions that had led her here. Yes, that logic was tainted with her sentiment, but wasn't his as well? Jedi had tried to kill him and brought suffering to his people, therefore he hated Jedi, therefore all Jedi had to die... Except this one? Because she was like someone who had been close to him, long ago. *I'm doubly tainted,* he decided. He was in no position to pass judgment on her. For whatever it was worth, Grievous was starting to realize sentiment was just as powerful a force as logic. Perhaps it wasn't as self-limiting as he'd believed.

"And how, exactly," Grievous finally spoke, "do you intend to change things for the better?"

"I'm here to advise you. If that means being the voice of reason that stops you from destroying a planet or killing millions..." The girl shrugged. "I guess I'll have done something meaningful for once in my life, right?"

"So, you're here to influence me to be more like you," said Grievous.

"Yes," agreed the girl.

At least she's honest in her intentions, he thought. "You really are a bold one, girl," Grievous said. "What if I don't want to be like you?"

"No one ever got anywhere by giving up," said the girl. "It's like my master said, if you fall down six times, stand up seven."

Again, Grievous found himself considering her words. *Fall down six times, stand up seven...* What a simple, almost childish phrase. And yet... He'd heard something along those lines once, it was a message that had kept him strong even in the darkest hours of his life. Whoever said that, whatever they had actually said, he did not know. But the spirit was the same! *Have I met you before?* he wondered. *Who were you, then?* Did he believe in reincarnation? Grievous supposed he did, considering the idea had come to him without him even questioning it. Whenever he was with this rogue Jedi, he discovered more about himself.

"Your master was wise, for a Jedi," Grievous said. "And you rightly follow his teachings. You are worth keeping around."

"Thank you... I think..?"

Another moment of quiet passed, this time awkward instead of contemplative. It was the girl who broke it first:

"I heard on the news that some people want Congress to nationalize the assets of the commerce guilds within Separatist territory," she said. The remark caught Grievous off-guard.

"Is that so?" he asked.

"There's been a lot of drama over it. I think you should do it, at least to those who moved against you," said the girl. "The Trade Federation and Techno Union seemed to have had nothing to do with the coup. Reward them and punish your enemies. I mean, that's what I'd do."

"And what do you think I should do with the leaders of the coup?" asked Grievous, curious to hear what a Jedi would say.

"Put them on trial?" she said, as more of a question. Yes, that sounded like what Jedi would do.

"I was thinking live broadcast execution," said Grievous.

"Why am I not surprised?"

Grievous laughed. "We used to do execution holovids when we fought the huk. We'd rehearse it with the prisoners over and over, until they became too tired to struggle and started to wonder if it'd ever happen. *Then* we'd actually kill them. It worked every time."

"That's just torture," the girl said, giving him an uneasy look.

"Would you be merciful with the ones who enslaved your brothers and sisters and sold them off-world, never to see their homes and families again?" asked Grievous.

That got the Jedi girl to shut up for a moment. Her troubled expression told him that no, she wouldn't have been, and that she didn't like that about herself.

"I do not understand your Republic," said Grievous. "You act so high and mighty, so self-righteous and noble, and then behind everyone's backs you deal with scum like the huk and Hutts."

"It's not *my* Republic, anymore," said the girl. "And are you so different? Zygerrians? Trandoshans?"

"That was Dooku, not me," Grievous snapped.

"And favoring the Hutts and these huk of yours was the Senate, not me," the girl said back. "If the whole of the Republic is guilty, then you share in Dooku's guilt too. Don't pretend you're somehow the righteous one here."

"I am a remorseless, cold-blooded killer for whom there is no such thing as collateral damage. I do not pretend to be anything else, unlike the Jedi and the Republic."

The Jedi girl crossed her arms and scowled, glaring off at the planet below. "Well, if they elect Tarkin, they won't be pretending to be anything else either," said she.

"Who?" asked Grievous. He'd never heard of a Tarkin before. Not that he knew any Republic names besides Palpatine and the Jedi he fought.

"Wilhuff Tarkin, former Republic Navy officer turned senator. Very much one of Palpatine's men. Senator Bail Organa is the leader of the peace faction in the Senate, he's Tarkin's opponent. Probably won't win, though," explained the girl, sighing. "It's a shame, Organa's one of the few decent senators in that cesspool."

"All politicians are criminals," Grievous grumbled. Dooku had once told him that. "But once again, you prove your worth to me. You have insight on both the Republic and Confederacy. I want to know everything there is to know about why this war is happening, and why it's happening the way it is."

"That's a very broad goal, General..."

"If we are to win, then I must play to our strengths and exploit their weaknesses. This is basic strategy." Grievous stood up, and the girl flinched at the sudden movement from him. *She still thinks I might kill her!* he thought. "Doctor!" Grievous shouted.

"Yes, master?" A-4D answered, appearing at the entrance to his cupboard under the elevator deck.

"Find our guest somewhere suitable to live," he commanded. "No 'airlock accommodations!'"

The Jedi girl sighed again. "I don't even want to know what happened to your last *guest...*"

As it turned out, a suitable place to live was a passenger suite from *Invisible Hand*'s days as a quasi-civilian freighter. Not that *Invisible Hand* or her sisters had ever been intended to operate as freighters, that'd just been a front for their true purpose in the long-planned war. Or so Republic Intelligence had said. For all Esera knew now, the *Providence*-class cruisers – or carriers as some classified them – had indeed once been built as freighters. The awkward firing angles of the widely-dispersed main battery seemed to imply a hasty retrofit. But whatever the real story, they did have a dozen or so suites for high-class passengers. None of them were currently occupied. *Except mine, now.*

Apparently, the cleaning droids had never been taken offline in three years of war: the double-width bed was immaculately made, the floor was spotless, the furniture – made of real wood! – was polished, the plants were watered and trimmed. Somehow it'd escaped all the heavy damage the ship had taken in the last two months or so. This kind of luxury was something Esera had never experienced before, not even during her stay with Lirka and Sirka. She had no idea what to do with all this space and *stuff*. There was even a private holonet terminal in here!

At the Jedi Temple, holonet access had been tightly regulated. The only terminals were in the archive, for purely academic purposes. Firewalls and censor programs restricted practical use to only looking up data from government ministries and cooperating university networks throughout Republic space. The idea was that Jedi wouldn't need the holonet for anything else. Her master had put it more bluntly: the holonet's primary functions were for pornography and mischief, and *good Jedi* didn't partake in either, he'd said with a smug smirk. Esera might have taken after her master in many ways, but not that closely. *Not today,* Esera decided, giving a disdaining stare at the terminal.

After finding R8 a charging port in the room – Esera wasn't surprised to find it had multiple port types and an array of adapters hidden away in a cabinet – she decided to attend to mundane matters. Like finding something to eat. From the ship's internal navigation system, she learned there was only one mess hall. Republic ships had one for the clones, and one for officers. *Invisible Hand* only had a mess hall for the organic crew, which numbered less than a hundred. On her way there, Esera had to take several bizarre detours that probably made her walk three times as long. At one point, Esera found herself weighing half as much as usual because the artificial gravity in that passage was malfunctioning. The ship had been massively damaged over the past few months, and there were sealed off sections everywhere undergoing repairs.

When Esera arrived, she was not surprised to see most of them were Nemoidians. But there were others, mostly Separatist-aligned species. She *was* surprised to learn that she wasn't the only Human aboard. The other was male. But she was interrupted before she could consider his presence.

"Ah, yes, our new arrival!" called a voice from the cluster of Nemoidians. "I am Captain Lushros Dofine, welcome to my ship," the Nemoidian in the biggest hat said.

"Th-thanks," Esera stammered. *Oh no, attention!* she thought. *Did Grievous tell them what I am?* "I'm, uh, Esera. Esera Komara."

"You're one of the General's spies, aren't you?" Dofine asked. "Come, sit, introduce yourself! I don't remember the last time our crew count went up instead of down!"

What an oddly friendly Nemoidian, Esera thought. "Um..." Esera sat down, and realized all the food was at the center of the big table the Nemoidians were at. That was very different from the lines and trays of Republic mess halls. She glanced at the other human, who ignored her. "I don't know what to say about myself," Esera said. "Uh, I was born on Stalimur. But I mostly grew up in the Core, and, uh, Inner Rim. I've been all over the galaxy, really. Even out to Terminus."

"Ah, a well-traveled woman," Dofine said. "I hope you don't mind Nemoidian food, it's all we really have here."

Esera had never tasted Nemoidian food in her life. "Not at all," she said.

"Help yourself, then, it is our custom." Dofine gestured to the huge plates at the center of the table, all placed atop a rotating platform so anyone could get to any plate. It was an oddly communal setup for such a selfish and greedy race. Or maybe she'd just been raised on anti-Nemoidian propaganda, and never been given reason to question it?

Some of their food was immediately recognizable. There were transparent noodles, almost as thin as hair, and a big bowl of soup with floating bits of vegetables and meat. And there were stranger things too, such as the plate of fried worms that looked like gigantic maggots, or the mysterious purple jelly-like substance. Esera took a bit of everything, because three years of war and field rations had taught her never to refuse any real food put in front of her.

"She's trying the zakka," one Nemoidian whispered to another, as she scooped some of the purple jelly onto her plate. The both snickered quietly. Well, now there really was no backing out!

"I love zakka," said Esera, giving the whisperer a stern glare.

"It's always a pleasure to have aliens who appreciate our cuisine," Dofine said, with a polite smile. *That's right, I'm the alien here,* Esera thought. After spending most of her life being a Human on a Human-majority planet, that was a strange notion.

Esera wasn't sure what she thought of Nemoidian food. There was a fiery kick in the soup, which she liked, but the noodles had a strange and discomforting texture when they got too cool. The fried maggot-worms were actually not that bad, crunchy on the outside and squishy on the inside, tasting a bit like a certain fist-sized tuber frequently fried on many Human worlds. The zakka, the purple jelly, was even spicier than the soup. Esera didn't know what to make of a spicy jelly. It made her nose runny and her eyes tear up, but she ate it all.

"It's very good," Esera said, going for a second round with the soup. The whispering Nemoidian looked both annoyed and impressed.

"How long have you been serving the General?" asked one of the Nemoidians.

"Since the day after we met," said Esera, not even lying.

"Aren't you a bit young for a spy?" asked someone else.

"No," Esera said.

"What exactly do you do for the General?"

"If I told you, I wouldn't be very good at my job."

The Nemoidians and other alien crew members grew increasingly curious about her. Even the other Human started tuning in after a while.

"Should I buy stock in the Techno Union while its rising, or buy the dip on Commerce Guild stock?" asked a Quarren from another table.

"Buy low, sell high, my ma- mother used to say," said Esera, barely catching herself from saying *master*. "But I wouldn't bet on anyone who sides against Grievous."

"If you could have one ship, what would you own?" asked the whisperer.

"One with a cloaking device," Esera told him. "I don't like attention."

"As expected of a spy," Dofine said, nodding in approval. He didn't take the hint. "Miss Komara, do you hold any formal rank?"

"Um... No, actually," she said. "I've never been given a rank. My identification papers say I'm a civilian."

"But you've taken part in the war?" asked Dofine.

"Yes... Yes, I have." More than he cared to know, that was for sure.

"Tell us a story!" one of the Nemoidians asked.

Esera put her hand on her chin. *This is a little too much socializing for me,* she thought. *I'll give them one and then go back to my room.* "Alright," she said. "So, this was a while back. I won't tell you the planet, it's confidential information." The crowd leaned forward, and Esera decided on a story that'd put the Separatists in a not-terrible light: her experience on Tarhassan. "Anyone ever seen that Republic holovid, *Landing at Point Rain?*"

A chorus of 'no' answered her.

"It was pure propaganda. There's a scene where the Jedi heroes just run up to artillery with their clones and hardly suffer a single loss," Esera explained. "I don't need to explain to you that this isn't how it works in reality. But apparently not everyone got this message. There were three Jedi on this planet, all with their clones and local Loyalist forces. The Jedi master was old, but they needed another general for the war, so they dragged him out of the Temple. He didn't know what he was doing, he'd never studied war. He'd never had to, like most of the older Jedi. So, seeing the enemy between him and his objective, he ordered a direct charge on the Separatist defensive line. Full on frontal assault. Against an entrenched army with pre-sighted artillery, dug-in tanks, an anti-air umbrella, and crossfire zones designed into their trenches."

Esera looked around the table, taking in the expressions of the crew. They all seemed amused, for the most part, but a few were already shaking their heads. She continued. "Now, the two younger Jedi, a knight and his padawan, they didn't think this was a good idea. But they had their orders, and they followed them. They didn't know that much about war either. So in they all charged. Their walkers were picked off by the dug-in tanks, their gunships couldn't penetrate the air defense umbrella, and their clones and Loyalists were mowed down in the crossfire. When they tried to take cover, the artillery just hit them. It was a massacre!"

"Serves them right," a Nemoidian said.

"Jedi returned my people to servitude, they had it coming," the Quarren agreed.

"It's not over yet," Esera said, before taking a deep breath. "You see, they – the Separatists – weren't using energy guns. They had these huge slugthrowers for artillery, firing shells with metal casings. The clones wore armor to protect against shrapnel from those kind of weapons, but the Loyalist militiamen weren't so well-equipped. So the Jedi and their forces are out in this no-man's land, their walkers and hovertanks are burning, their air support just isn't getting through, their own artillery is being hit by counter-battery fire from these Tri-droids, and now they've got Separatist artillery to worry about too. It's a disaster, a catastrophe! The clones are being picked off with heavy blasters, the militiamen are being torn apart by the big slugthrower guns. I mean literally torn apart, there's bodyparts flying everywhere. It's all a bit much for the Jedi, they've never seen anything like this. Especially the padawan." For a moment, Esera paused, reliving the memories in full. "She's just some kid, she's never heard the sounds people make when they've been made blind and deaf and blown in half but they're somehow still alive. It's too much for her, she hunkers down and just tries to survive. Too scared to even fight back, I guess. Not that she could even if she tried, but she doesn't know there's a sniper team focused on every Jedi on the battlefield. Her master gets hit by them, but he lives. The old Jedi isn't so lucky. He didn't think he needed armor. And finally, *finally,* they all retreat, once he's dead.

"The Separatists, the living and breathing ones, aren't doing so great, either, by the way. They've trained for battle, but they've never experienced it any more than the Jedi or the Loyalists. They're horrified when they see what they've done to their own people in the Loyalist army. It was brother against brother, son against father out there. They've butchered their neighbors and friends they've known all their lives. Their droid allies don't care, they just keep shooting at the Republic troops as they flee. The clones shoot back, their morale never broke. They were born to die. Even back then, that disgusted me... I went back to the battlefield that night, I tried to help who I could. The Republic had to abandon a lot of their wounded, you see. I couldn't save everyone. Couldn't even help most of them, really. Sometimes I wonder why I even tried."

She let her words settle on her quieted audience. *Please think about what I've told you,* she pleaded silently with them. Esera had surprised herself, she hadn't meant to tell that story. Not in that much detail, at least. That day was not one she liked to remember. In fact she'd been actively trying to forget it ever happened. But her crowd sat still, stony-faced, showing no signs of understanding or compassion.

"Miss Komara," said Captain Dofine, a serious look on his face. "I don't think the General would approve of you portraying the enemy in such a sympathetic light."

"I'm not the General," Esera said as coldly as she could. She stood up and left the mess hall.

You dumb girl, what were you thinking? she scolded herself. *These people have been fighting the Republic for three years, maybe more! Did you think they'd find any compassion in their hearts for their foes? Stupid, stupid girl!* If she couldn't even get through to some nosy Nemoidians, then how was she going to get through to Grievous? Esera went back to her room and hid, just like the fifteen year old her had hid in that crater, dozens of meters from the Separatist trenches. Her first day on *Invisible Hand* hadn't started out to a success. As Esera found out the next day, though, her first week wouldn't be a success either. Grievous had decided he was going to 'help' her improve her fighting skills.

Just die in my sleep already, Esera thought, when she heard the news.

"You've got to be kidding me," Obi-wan said with a groan, as the plate of fried grubs was shoved into the prison cell. Captain Dofine was honorable, for a Nemoidian, he'd had Obi-wan moved to slightly nicer accommodations for his help during the battle. He actually had a bed now, even if it was just a foam pad on the floor. And he'd also started having Obi-wan sent food that wasn't raw nutrient paste.

But were grubs really an upgrade from the gluey slime that was nutrient paste?

"Eat it, or not," said the Nemoidian officer who ran the brig and its single prisoner.

"I guess beggars can't be choosers," sighed Obi-wan.

Author's note: Oof, Esera, stop being a 17 year old with grand ideals, you're too pure for this twisted world. The discussion between GG and Esera was written in 2015, it's been tweaked and edited since then but it's one of the first scenes I wrote, trying to get in Esera's head and figure out why she's done what she's done. Ahsoka Tano and Asajj Ventress join the story for a little bit, too, this is what I meant by guest characters way back in... 2016 I think. I bet some of you are feeling pretty smug with your predictive abilities right now, aren't you?

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